Treatise of Metaphysics

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Introduction: Some questions about Man

Few people take the trouble to acquire a truly informed concept of Man. The peasants of one part of Europe have scarcely any idea of our species except that it is an animal with two feet and pasty skin, pronouncing a few words, cultivating the land, paying some tribute (without knowing why) to another animal whom they call “king,” selling their produce for the highest price they can, and gathering on certain days in the year to chant prayers in a language they understand not at all.

A king views practically the entire human species as composed of beings made to obey him and those like him. A Parisian girl when first introduced into society finds in it only that which may sustain her vanity, while her indistinct idea of happiness and the din made by everything that surrounds her prevent her soul from hearing the voice of all the rest of Nature. A Turkish girl in the silence of the harem views men as superior beings, obliged by some law to go to bed with their slaves every Friday, and her imagination does not advance much further than that. A priest divides the entire universe into ecclesiastics and laity, and he has no difficulty in seeing the ecclesiastical portion as the more noble, made to guide the others, etc.

Anyone who believed that the philosophers had more comprehensive ideas about human nature would be very much mistaken, with the exception of

Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, Bayle, and a very small number of wise minds; all the rest have their particular opinions about Man, which are just as restricted as those of the common people, but less clear-cut. Ask Father Malebranche what Man is, and he will reply that he is a substance made in God's image, greatly flawed by Original Sin, yet more closely united with God than with his own body, seeing everything in God, thinking and feeling everything in God, etc.

Pascal sees the whole world as a collection of the wicked and unhappy, created in order to be damned, among whom God has nonetheless chosen a few souls from all eternity, that is to say one out of five or six million, to be saved.

One says that Man is a soul united with a body, and when the body dies the soul lives forever on its own. The other claims that Man is a body that necessarily thinks; and neither one proves what they claim.

In my inquiry into Man, I would like to act as I do in the study of astronomy. My thoughts sometimes leave the earth's sphere, from which all the movements of the heavenly bodies above seemed to be irregular and unclear, and after observing the movement of the planets as though I were on the Sun, I then compare the apparent movements I see from earth with the true movements, which I would see if I were indeed on the Sun. In the same way, I will attempt in studying Man to first place myself outside this sphere and beyond the reach of partiality, and to do away with all the prejudices of my education and native land, and above all with the prejudices of philosophy.

I will suppose, for example, that I was born with the faculties of thinking and perception that I possess at present, but that I do not possess human form, and that I come down from the sphere of Mars or Jupiter. I am able to glance rapidly at every century and every country, and consequently at all the stupidities of this little sphere.

This supposition is at least as easy to adopt as that which I adopt when I imagine that I am on the Sun in order to observe the sixteen planets that travel in a regular way through space around that star.

Chapter One: Of the different species of men

Having arrived on this little pile of mud, and with no more idea of what Man is than men have of the inhabitants of Mars or Jupiter, I land on the sea-coast in the country of Kaffraria, and I begin by looking for a man. I see monkeys,

elephants, negroes, etc., who all seem to have some tinge of reason, though imperfectly. Each one of them seems to possess a language that I do not understand in the least, and in each case their actions seem to be performed to some purpose. If I were to judge the situation based on the initial effect they have upon me, I would be inclined to believe at first that of all these animals the elephant is the reasoning animal; but in order to avoid deciding the matter too superficially I look at the offspring of these various beasts. I examine a six-month-old negro baby, a baby elephant, a baby monkey, and a baby lion. I see, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that these young animals have incomparably more force and ability, more ideas, more passions, and more memory than the negro child, and that they express all their desires much more conspicuously; but after a certain amount of time the negro baby has just as many ideas as they do, and I even recognize that these negro animals speak a language among themselves, much more fully articulated and much more varied than that of the other beasts. I have taken the time to learn this language, and finally, after observing the small degree of superiority they have after all over the monkeys and the elephants, I have been so bold as to judge that in fact they are men, and I have produced the following definition for myself:

Man is a black animal with wool on its head, walking on two paws, almost as nimble as a monkey, less strong than other animals of the same size, having a few more ideas than they do and greater facility in expressing them, but subject to the same constraints, being born, living, and dying just like them.

After spending some time among this species, I travel to the coastal regions of the East Indies. I am surprised at what I see there: the elephants, lions, monkeys, and parrots are not exactly like those in Kaffraria, but the men seem to be completely different. They are a beautiful yellow color, and have no wool on their heads, which are covered with long black manes. They seem to have ideas contrary to those of the negroes in every respect. I am thus forced to alter my definition and to divide human nature into two species, yellow with manes and black with wool.

But in Batavia, Goa, and Surat, places where all the nations congregate together, I see a great crowd of Europeans, who are white and have neither wool nor manes but very fine blond hair, and beards on their chins. I am also shown many Americans, who have no beards; so here my definition and my species of men are greatly expanded.

In Goa I encounter a species even more singular than all of these. This is a man dressed in a long black cassock, who says that he is made for instructing the others; all these different men you see, he tells me, are all born from one

father, and he goes on to tell me a long story about this. But what this animal tells me seems highly suspect. I inquire as to whether a male and female negro with black wool and wide flat noses sometimes produce white children with blond hair, aquiline noses, and blue eyes, and whether the beardless nations are the offspring of the bearded ones, and whether white males and females have ever produced yellow people. The answer I receive is no: that negroes transplanted to Germany, for example, still produce only negroes, unless the Germans take it upon themselves to alter the species, and the same with all the others. Moreover, I am told that no one with any education has ever claimed that pure-bred species might degenerate, and almost the only one to assert this foolishness is the abbé Dubos, in his book *Reflections sur la peinture et sur la poésie*.

It seems to me then that I have good reason to believe that men are like trees, that pear trees, fir trees, oaks, and apricot trees are not descended from the same tree, and that bearded white men, negroes with wool, yellow people with manes, and men without beards are not descended from the same man.

Chapter Two: Whether there is a God

We will investigate the faculty of thought in these different species of men, where his ideas come from, whether he has a soul distinct from the body, whether this soul is eternal, whether it is free, whether it has virtues and vices, etc. But the majority of these ideas are dependent on the existence or non-existence of a God. I believe it necessary to begin by sounding the depths of this great fundamental issue; here more than ever let us discard all passions and all prejudices, and look in good faith at what our reason can teach us about the question, Is there a God? Is there not?

I observe firstly that there are peoples who have no knowledge of a creator God; it is true that these peoples are barbarous, and very few in number, but after all they are men, and if the knowledge of a God was a necessary part of human nature, Hottentot savages would have just as sublime an idea of a supreme being as we do. Moreover, there is not one child among civilized peoples who has the least idea of a God in his head, and it requires some effort to imprint this idea on them. They often pronounce the word “God” all their lives without attaching any firm idea to it; you can see in any case that the ideas of God vary as much among men as do their religions and laws, and on that point I cannot help reflecting: Is it possible that the knowledge of a God, our creator, our preserver, our all, should be less necessary to Man than a nose and five fingers? All men are born with a nose and five fingers, and none are born with the knowledge of God. Whether this is unfortunate or

not, such is undoubtedly the human condition.

Let us see whether we acquire the knowledge of a God in the same way that we arrive at mathematical notions and some metaphysical ideas. We can do nothing better in such an important inquiry than to weigh what can be said for and against it and decide in favor of that which seems most in conformity with reason.

Summary of the reasons in favor of the existence of God

There are two ways of arriving at the notion of a being who presides over the universe; the most natural and most perfect way for ordinary intellects is to consider not only the order that exists in the universe but the end with which each thing seems to be connected. Long books have been written about this one idea, and all these long books put together amount to nothing more than the following argument: When I see a watch whose hand marks the hours, I conclude that an intelligent being has arranged the workings of this machine in order that the hand should mark the hours. In the same way, when I see the workings of the human body, I conclude that an intelligent being has arranged these organs to be introduced into the womb and nourished there for nine months, that the eyes are given in order to see, the hands in order to grasp, etc. But from this argument alone I cannot conclude anything further, except that it is probable that an intelligent, superior being has skillfully prepared and fashioned matter, but I cannot conclude simply on the basis of this that this being has made matter out of nothing, and that he is infinite in every respect, no matter how long I seek in my mind for the connection between these ideas.

It is probable that I am the work of a being more powerful than myself, therefore this being has existed for all eternity, therefore he has created everything, therefore he is infinite, etc.: I do not see the chain of propositions that leads directly to this conclusion, I see only that there exists something more powerful than myself, and no more than that.

It seems to me that one can only produce sophistries and utter absurdities if one wishes to force oneself to deny the necessity of a being that exists in and of itself, or if one wishes to claim that matter is this being; but when the goal is to identify and discuss the attributes of this being whose existence has been demonstrated, that is another matter entirely. The masters of the art of reasoning, the Lockes, Clarkes, etc., will tell you that this being is an intelligent being, for he who has created everything must possess all the types of perfection he has put into the things he has created, otherwise the

effect would be more perfect than the cause; or alternatively, there would be a perfection in the effect that had been produced by nothing, which is obviously absurd. Therefore, since there are intelligent beings, and since matter cannot have given itself the faculty of thought, it must be that the being that exists in and of itself, God, is an intelligent being.

The second argument is more metaphysical, less designed to be grasped by commoner minds, and it leads to a much vaster body of knowledge. Here it is in brief: I exist, therefore something exists. If something exists, then something has existed for all eternity, for whatever is, is either in and of itself or has received its being from another. If it is in and of itself, it is out of necessity, it has always been out of necessity, and this is God. If it has received its being from another, and this other from a third, the entity from whom the first in this series received its being must necessarily be God, because you cannot conceive that a being gives being to another unless it has the power to create. Moreover, if you say that something receives – I do not say its form, but its existence, from another thing, and that thing from a third thing, and this third thing from yet another, and so on back ad infinitum, what you say is absurd, for all those beings would then have no cause of their existence; taken all together they would have no external cause of their existence, and taken individually they would have no internal cause of it. That is to say, taken all together, they owe their existence to nothing, and taken individually none of them exists in and of itself, therefore none of them can exist necessarily.

I am thus obliged to admit that there is a being that exists necessarily, in and of itself, for all eternity, and is the origin of all other beings. From this it follows essentially that this being is infinite in duration, in immensity, and in power, for who could set limits to it? But you will say to me, the material world is exactly this being we are searching for. Let us examine in good faith whether that is probable.

If this material world exists in and of itself with absolute necessity, it is a contradiction in terms to suppose that the smallest part of this universe could be other than it is, for if it is absolutely necessary at the present moment, the word “necessary” excludes every other way of being. Now certainly this table on which I write, this pen that I use, have not always been what they now are, and these thoughts I put down on paper did not even exist a moment ago, therefore they do not exist necessarily. Now if each part does not exist with absolute necessity, it is impossible for the whole to exist in and of itself. I produce a movement, therefore the movement did not exist previously, therefore movement is not essential to matter, therefore matter receives it from elsewhere, therefore there is a God who gives it to matter. In the same way intelligence is not essential to matter, for a rock or an ear of wheat do

not think at all, so from whom have the parts of matter that think and perceive received perception and thought? It cannot be from themselves, since they perceive in spite of themselves, it cannot be from matter in general, since thought and perception are in no way essential to matter; therefore, they have received these gifts from the hand of a supreme, intelligent, infinite being who is the original cause of all beings.

There in a few words are the proofs of the existence of a God, and the summary of many volumes, a summary that readers may add to as much as they like. Here, with equal brevity, are the objections one can raise to this system.

Problems with respect to the existence of God

1. If God is not this material world, he has created it, or else if you prefer he has given to some other being the power to create it, which comes to the same thing; but in making this world either he has drawn it from nothingness or he has drawn it from his own divine being. He cannot have drawn it from nothingness, which is nothing. He cannot have drawn it from himself, since in that case this world would be essentially part of the divine essence. Therefore, I can have no conception of the creation; therefore, I must not accept that there was a creation.

2. God would have made this world either necessarily or freely. If he made it from necessity, he must always have made it, for this necessity is eternal; therefore, in this case the world would be eternal and created, which leads to a contradiction. If God made it freely purely by choice, with no antecedent reason, this is another contradiction, for we contradict ourselves if we suppose the infinitely wise being does everything for no determining reason, and the infinitely powerful being spent an eternity without making the least use of his powers.

3. If it seems to the majority of people that an intelligent being has stamped the whole of nature with the seal of his wisdom, and that everything seems to have been made for some particular purpose, in the eyes of the philosophers it is even more true that everything in nature takes place because of the eternal, independent, and immutable laws of mathematics. The construction and life span of the human body are the result of the balance of fluids and the force of its inner levers. The more discoveries are made about the structure of the universe, the more it is found to be organized, from the stars down to the mites, by the laws of mathematics. We may therefore be allowed to believe that since these laws have operated of their own nature, there result from them necessary effects,

which we take to be the arbitrary decisions of an intelligent power. For example, a field produces plants because of the nature of its soil, watered by the rain, and not because there are horses who need hay and oats; and so on for all the rest.

4. If the organization of all the parts of this world, and everything that takes place among the beings who have sensation and thought, were a proof of the existence of a creator and master, it would be an even better proof of a barbarous being. For once one accepts final causes, one is obliged to say that God, infinitely wise and infinitely good, has given life to all the creatures in order that they may devour one another. Indeed, if we observe all the animals, we will see that each species possesses an irresistible instinct that compels it to destroy another species. With respect to the sufferings of Man, we have plenty of reasons throughout our lives to rebuke the divinity. However often we are told that the wisdom and goodness of God are not at all the same as ours, that argument will have no force in the eyes of many people, who will reply that they can only judge whether something is just on the basis of the idea of justice that God is supposed to have given them, that one can only measure with the measuring device available, and that it is as impossible for us not to consider a being to be barbarous when he behaves like a barbarian as it is not to think that a being is six feet tall when we have measured it with a six-foot rule and it seems to us to be of that size.

If, they will add, someone replies to us that our measuring device is faulty, this reply seems to imply a contradiction, because it is God himself who will have given us this false idea, therefore God will have created us only to deceive us. Now this is like saying that a being that cannot admit imperfection casts those he has created into error, which is strictly speaking the only real imperfection, and this is obviously to contradict oneself. Lastly the materialists will end up by saying that there are fewer absurdities to swallow in the system of atheism than in that of deism, because in the former system it is in truth necessary that we conceive the world that we see to be eternal and infinite, while in the latter system it is necessary that we imagine another infinite, eternal being and then attach to it the creation, of which we can have no conception. It is therefore, they will add, much easier for us not to believe in a God than to believe in one.

Replies to these objections

1. The arguments against the creation amount only to showing that it is impossible for us to conceive of it, that is to say to conceive how it happened, but they do not show that it is impossible in and of itself. For

in order for the creation to be impossible it would first have to be proved that it is impossible for God to exist; but far from proving this impossibility, we are obliged to recognize that it is impossible that he does not exist. This argument, that there must exist outside of us a being who is infinite, eternal, immense, all-powerful, free, and intelligent, and the darkness that accompanies this light, only function to show that this light exists, because from the very fact that an infinite being's existence is proved to us it is also proved to us that it must be impossible for a finite being to understand it.

2. To say that God could not have created this world either necessarily or freely is simply a sophism, which collapses as soon as it has been proved that there is a God, and that the world is not God. That objection amounts simply to this: I cannot understand how God could have created the universe at an earlier point in time rather than a later one, therefore he could not have created it; this is as if someone were to say, I cannot understand why that man or that horse did not exist a thousand years ago, therefore their existence is impossible.

Moreover, God's free will is a sufficient reason for the point in time at which he chose to create the world; if God exists, he is free, and he would not be free if he was always determined by a sufficient reason that his will did not govern. In any case, would this sufficient reason be within him or external to him? If it is external to him, then he does not determine himself freely, and if it is within him what else is it but his will?

1. The laws of mathematics are immutable, it is true, but it was not necessary that some laws are preferred to others; it was not necessary that the earth is in the place it is. No law of mathematics can operate by itself; none of them operate without movement, and movement does not exist in and of itself, therefore we have to resort to a prime mover.

I admit that the planets, placed at such and such distances from the sun, must travel through their orbits in accordance with the laws they observe, and that even their distance from the sun is governed by the quantity of matter they contain; but can we then say that it was necessary that there should be such and such a quantity of matter in each planet, that there should be a specific number of stars, that this number cannot be increased or decreased, or that it was absolutely necessary and inherent in the nature of things that there should be a certain number of beings on earth? No without a doubt, because this number changes every day. Therefore, all of nature from the most remote star down to a blade of grass must be subject to a prime mover.

With respect to the objection that meadows are not essentially made for

horses, etc., it cannot be concluded from this that there are no final causes, only that we do not know all the final causes. Here the most important thing is to reason in good faith, and not to seek to deceive oneself. When we see a thing that always has the same effect, that has only this effect and no other, and that is composed of an infinite number of organs in which there are an infinite number of movements, all of them combining to produce the same effect, it seems to me that we cannot without inwardly resisting deny that a final cause exists. The seeds and embryos of all the plants and all the animals are examples of this. Would we not have to be quite imprudent to say that none of these are connected with some end?

I agree that there is no demonstration strictly speaking that proves that the stomach is made for digestion, just as there is no demonstration that it is daylight; but the materialists are also very far from being able to demonstrate that the stomach is not made for digestion. Let us judge simply with fair-mindedness, as we judge things in the ordinary course of affairs, which opinion is the most probable one.

With respect to the reproach addressed to God, that he is unjust and cruel, I reply firstly that supposing there is such a thing as moral evil (which seems to me an imaginary notion), this moral evil is just as impossible to explain in the materialist system as in that based on a God. I reply secondly that we have no idea of justice other than the one we have developed for ourselves based on those actions that are useful to society and in conformity with the laws we ourselves have established for the common good. Now since this idea is nothing more than an idea about relations among men, it can have no analogy with God, and it is just as absurd to say of God in this sense that he is just or unjust as to say that he is blue or square.

It is therefore quite mad to reproach God because flies are eaten by spiders and men only live for eighty years, because men misuse their freedom to destroy one another, are subject to illnesses, cruel passions, etc., since we certainly have no idea how to prove that men and flies ought to be eternal. In order to be really sure that a thing is bad, we must equally be able to see that it could be better. We can certainly not judge that a machine is imperfect except in terms of the perfection it is lacking: we cannot, for example, judge that the three sides of a triangle are unequal unless we have the idea of an equilateral triangle; we cannot say that a watch is no good if we do not have a clear idea of a certain number of equal spaces that the hand of this watch ought to pass through in an equal period of time. But who has an idea of how this world ought to have been made? So, it is madness to say that the organization of this world is unworthy of the divine wisdom.

There are difficulties inherent in the opinion that there is a God, but in the

opposite opinion there are absurdities: this is what we should examine carefully, by making a brief summary of what a materialist is compelled to believe.

Necessary consequences of the materialists' opinion

The materialists have to say that the world exists necessarily, in and of itself, in such a way that it would be a contradiction in terms to say that some part of matter might not exist or might exist otherwise than it does. They have to say that the material world essentially contains within itself thought and sensation, since it cannot acquire these things, since in that case thought would come to it out of nothing. In any case it cannot get them from elsewhere, since it is supposed to be all that there is. Therefore it must be that this thought and sensation are inherent in it, just as extension, divisibility, and the ability to move are inherent in matter; and along with this it must be admitted that only a small number of the parts of the world possess this sensation and thought that is essential to it as a whole, and that these sensations and thoughts, although inherent in matter, nonetheless perish every moment. Or else it would have to be claimed that there exists a world-soul that permeates all organisms, and then it would have to be the case that this soul is something different from the world. Thus, no matter which way we turn, we find only imaginary ideas that undermine one another.

The materialists must also maintain that movement is essential to matter, and in claiming this they are compelled to say that movement has never been able nor ever will be able to increase or decrease. They would be forced to claim that a hundred thousand men all marching at once and a hundred shots fired from cannon produce no new movement in nature. They must also have to assert that there is no freedom, and in so doing they destroy all social bonds, and they believe in inevitability, which is just as difficult to understand as freedom, but which they themselves refuse to accept in practice. A fair-minded reader who has carefully weighed the arguments for and against the existence of a creator God may now see which side possesses the greater plausibility.

After having wormed our way from one difficulty to another and one conclusion to another, to the point where we can view this statement, "There is a God," as the most probable one that men can believe, and having seen that the contrary assertion is one of the most absurd, it seems natural to inquire into the relationship between God and ourselves, and to see whether God has established laws for thinking beings, like the laws of mechanics for material beings in general, and to inquire whether there are principles of

morality, and what they might be, and whether there is a religion established by God himself. These questions are doubtless so important that all others give way to them, and the other inquiries with which we spend our lives amusing ourselves are truly frivolous in comparison. But these questions will be addressed in a more appropriate place when we come to study Man as a social animal.

First let us ask how his ideas come to him, and how he thinks, before seeing what use he makes, and must make, of his thoughts.

Chapter Three: That all our ideas reach us by way of the senses

Anyone who described accurately everything that takes place in his understanding would readily admit that his sensations have provided all his ideas. But philosophers who have misused their reason have claimed that we possess innate ideas. They have asserted this only on the same grounds on which they have said that God took cubes of matter and rubbed them against one another to make the visible world. They have forged systems with which they flattered themselves that they could propose an apparent explanation of natural phenomena. This way of philosophizing is even more dangerous than the contemptible jargon of the Scholastics. For as that jargon was completely devoid of sense, an honest mind simply needed to pay it a little attention in order to perceive at once how ridiculous it was, and to go looking for truth elsewhere. But in the case of an ingenious and daring hypothesis, which at first has some tinge of plausibility, human pride has an interest in believing it; the mind congratulates itself for grasping these subtle principles and summons up all its sagacity to defend them. It is clear that we should never invent hypotheses. We should absolutely not say, let us begin by inventing principles with which we will seek to explain everything. What we should say is, let us make a precise analysis of things, and after that we will seek to see with a great deal of circumspection whether our analysis has a connection with any principles. Those who wrote the romance of innate ideas flattered themselves that they would thus explain our ideas of infinity, immensity, God, and some other metaphysical notions that they imagined were common to all men; but if before committing themselves to this system they had sought to reflect that many men throughout their lives have not the slightest hint of these notions, that no children have them except when they are given them, and that when finally we have acquired them we have only a very imperfect grasp of them, and purely negative ideas of them, these philosophers would have been ashamed of their own opinions. If there is any

assertion outside mathematics that has been demonstrated, it is that Man has no innate ideas. If there were, all men from birth would have the idea of a God and all would have the same idea; all would have the same metaphysical notions. Add to that the ridiculous absurdity they adopt, that God gives us notions in our mother's belly, all of which we have to be taught in our youth.

It is thus unquestionably true that our first ideas are our sensations; little by little we receive composite ideas from the sensations that strike our organs, our memory stores these perceptions, then we classify them under general ideas. And from this single faculty we possess, of being able to combine and classify our ideas, there results all of Man's vast knowledge.

Those who object that the ideas of infinite duration, extension, and number cannot come from our senses only have to look within themselves for a moment. First, they will see that they have no complete or even positive idea of infinity; it is simply by adding one material object to another that they have reached the awareness that they will never come to the end of this process. And they have named this inability "infinity," but it is something far closer to human ignorance than an idea beyond the reach of our senses. And if someone were to object that there exists real infinity in geometry, I reply that this is not true. We prove only that matter will always be further divisible, we prove that all possible circles will fit between two lines, we prove that an infinite number of plane surfaces has nothing in common with an infinite number of cubes. But this gives us no more of an idea of infinity than the assertion that there is a God gives us an idea of what God is.

But it is not enough to have convinced ourselves that all our ideas reach us through the senses. Our curiosity leads us to wonder just how they reach us. It is on this subject that all the philosophers have written their fine romances. It would have been easy to spare themselves the trouble, by examining in good faith the limits of human nature. Without the aid of the compass of mathematics, or the torch of experience and of physics, it is certain that we cannot move one step forward. Until our eyes become sharp enough to distinguish the constituent parts of gold from the constituent parts of a mustard-seed, it is quite certain that we will be unable to reason about their essence; and until Man acquires a different nature and new organs enabling him to perceive his own substance and the essence of his ideas, as he now has organs of sensation, it is unquestionable that it will be impossible for him to know them. To ask how we think and how we sense, or how our movements obey our will, is to ask for the secrets of the creator; our senses do not provide us with the means to attain this knowledge, any more than they provide us with wings when we wish that we could fly. And this in my opinion clearly proves that all our ideas reach us by way of the senses. For when our senses fail us, ideas fail us as well. It is impossible to know how I

think, for the same reason that it is impossible to have the idea of a sixth sense, and this is because we lack the organs that would transmit these ideas. This is why those who have had the imprudence to concoct a system explaining the nature of the soul and of our conceptions have been compelled to adopt the absurd belief in innate ideas, flattering themselves that among the metaphysical ideas supposedly floating down from heaven into our minds there would be a few that would reveal this impenetrable secret.

Of all the imprudent thinkers who have become lost in the depths of these inquiries, Father Malebranche is the one who seems to have become lost in the most sublime manner.

Here is what his system, which has created such a stir, actually amounts to: Our perceptions, which are occasioned by objects, cannot be caused by these objects themselves, since they certainly do not contain within themselves the power to produce a sensation. They do not come from ourselves, for in this respect we are as powerless as the objects. Therefore, it must be God who gives them to us; God is the place of our minds, and our minds subsist in him, therefore it is in him that we have our ideas and perceive everything.

Now I ask everyone whose head is not filled with mad notions, what clear idea does this argument give us?

I ask, what does it mean to say that God is the place of our minds? And even if the words “to perceive and see everything in God” were to produce a clear idea in us, I ask what we would gain by it, and in what way we would be wiser than before.

Certainly, to make something intelligible out of the system of Father Malebranche we would be compelled to have recourse to Spinozism, to imagine that the universe as a whole is God, that this God operates in every being, sensing in animals, thinking in men, growing in trees, that he is a thought, he is a pebble, that every part of himself is destroyed at each moment, and in short all the absurdities that necessarily follow from Spinoza’s principles.

The aberrations of all those who have sought to plumb the depths of what is impenetrable for us should teach us not to seek to go beyond the limitations of our nature. The true philosophy is to know how to stop at the right place and never to go forward without a sure guide. There is plenty of ground to cover without traveling in imaginary realms. Let us therefore be content to know, through experience supported by reasoning, our only source of knowledge, that our senses are the doors through which all our ideas enter our understanding, and let us bear in mind that it is completely impossible

for us to know the secret of this mechanism, because we possess no instrument appropriate for seeing its inner workings.

Chapter Four: That external objects do indeed exist

We would not have thought to address this question if it were not that the philosophers have sought to doubt the most obvious things, just as they flatter themselves that they know the most doubtful ones. Our senses, they say, make us have ideas, but perhaps our understanding receives these perceptions without there being any external object; we know that while we sleep, we see and sense things that do not exist. Perhaps our life is a continual dream, and death will be the moment of awakening, or the end of a dream with no awakening to follow. Our senses deceive us even while we are awake, and the slightest alteration in our sense-organs sometimes makes us see objects and hear sounds whose cause is simply to be found in the internal disorder of our bodies; it is therefore highly possible that what happens to us sometimes in fact happens to us all the time. They add that when we see an object, we perceive a color and a shape, we hear sounds, and we have chosen to call these the modes of the object. But what is the substance of this object? There indeed is where the object escapes our imagination. What we so audaciously call the substance is in fact nothing more than the combination of these modes. Take this tree and strip away this color and configuration, which gave you the idea of a tree, and what will remain? Now what I have called modes are simply my own perceptions. I can certainly say that I have the idea of a green color and of a body with a particular configuration, but I have no proof that this body and this color exist. This is what Sextus Empiricus said, and he was unable to find a reply to it.

Let us for a moment grant these gentlemen even more than they ask. They claim that no one can prove to them that bodies exist. Let us grant that they themselves have proved that there are no bodies. What will follow from this? Will we conduct our lives differently? Will we have different ideas about anything? It will be necessary merely to change a word in our conversation. For example, when a few battles have been fought, we will have to say that ten thousand men seem to have been killed, that such and such an officer seems to have broken his leg and that a surgeon seems to have cut it off for him. In the same way, when we are hungry, we will ask for the appearance of a piece of bread that we will seem to digest.

But here is what we could reply in a more serious vein:

1. You cannot make a strict comparison between life and dreaming, because while you sleep you only dream of things you have had an idea of when awake. You are sure that your dreams are nothing more than a feeble recollection. By contrast, while we are awake, when we have a sensation, we can never conclude that it is only a recollection. For example, if a stone falls and breaks my shoulder, it would be rather difficult for this to happen as the result of my effort to remember it.

2. It is quite true that our senses often deceive us. But what do we mean by that? Strictly speaking we only have one sense, that of touch. Sight, sound, and smell are no more than contact with intermediate bodies, which reach us from a distant body. I have no idea of the stars except through touch, and since the touch of the light, which comes from a thousand million leagues away and strikes my eye, is not palpable, unlike the touch of my hands, and since it depends on the medium these bodies have traveled through, this kind of touch is what we incorrectly call deceptive. It does not show me objects in their true place, it gives me no idea of their size; none of these kinds of non-palpable touch gives me a positive idea of these bodies. The first time that I smell something without seeing the object the smell comes from, my mind finds no relation between a body and this smell; but touch in the true sense of the term, the proximity of my body to another, independently of my other senses, gives me the idea of matter. For when I touch a rock, I do indeed sense that I cannot put myself in its place, and that in consequence something is there that is extended and impenetrable. Thus supposing (for what may we not suppose?) that a man had all his senses except the sense of touch, strictly understood, this man might very well doubt the existence of external objects and might perhaps go on for a long time without having any idea of them. But someone who was deaf, and blind, and had the sense of touch, could not doubt the existence of things that made him experience hardness; and this is because it is not essential to matter that a body possess color or make a sound, but it is essential that it be extended and impenetrable.

But what will the extreme skeptics reply to these two questions?

1. If there are no external objects and if my imagination does everything, why do I get burned when I touch fire, and I do not get burned when I think I am touching fire in a dream?

2. When I write my ideas down on this paper and another man reads me what I have written, how can I understand these very words that I have written and thought, if this other man is not really reading them to me? How could I even find them again if they are not there? In the end, no

matter how hard I try to doubt, I am more convinced of the existence of bodies than I am of several of the truths of geometry. This will seem astonishing, but there is nothing I can do about it. It is true that I lack geometrical proof that I have a father and mother, and it is true that it has been demonstrated to me, that is to say I cannot find a counter-argument, that an infinite number of curved lines can fit between a circle and its tangent; but I am sure that if an all-powerful being came and told me that one of these two propositions – that bodies exist, and that an infinite number of curved lines can fit between a circle and its tangent – is false, and asked me to guess which one, I would guess that it was the second; for since I know quite well that in nature there are no lines without area and depth, and no points without extension, and that the truths of geometry have no reality except in my mind, I might well suspect that my mind is in error.

In any case, since my chief goal here is to examine man as a social being, and I cannot be social unless there is a society and hence objects external to us, the Pyrrhonists will have to permit me to begin in the firm belief that bodies exist, otherwise I will be forced to disprove these gentlemen's existence.

Chapter Five: Whether Man has a soul and what this might be

We are certain that we are material beings, that we sense and think; we are convinced of the existence of a God who has made us; for reasons against which our minds cannot rebel, we have proved to ourselves that God has created everything that exists. We are convinced that it is impossible for us, and that it must be impossible for us, to know how he has given us being, but can we know what it is that thinks in us? What is this faculty that God has given us? Is it matter that senses, and thinks? Is it an immaterial substance? In a word, what is a soul? Here more than ever I need to put myself in the place of a thinking being, arriving from another sphere with none of the prejudices of this one, possessing the same abilities as myself but otherwise being nothing like what we call a man, and judging Man in an impartial manner.

If I were a superior being to whom the creator had revealed his secrets, as soon as I saw a man I would be able to say what this animal is. I would be able to define his soul and all his faculties in an informed way, with as much audacity as many philosophers did who knew nothing about it. But in admitting my own ignorance and trying out my feeble reasoning powers, the

only thing I can do is to make use of logical analysis, which is the stick that nature has given to the blind. I will examine everything piece by piece and then see whether I can make a judgment about the subject as a whole.

So, I imagine that I have arrived in Africa, and am surrounded by negroes, Hottentots, and other animals. I observe first that the vital organs are the same in all of them. The operations of their bodies all arise from the same vital principles; they all seem to have the same desires, the same passions, and the same needs, which they all express in their various languages. The language I understand first is that of the animals. It cannot be otherwise: the sounds with which they express themselves seem to be in no way arbitrary but are the living signs of their passions. These signs bear the imprint of what they are expressing. The noise made by a dog that wants to eat, combined with the attitudes it exhibits, has an obvious relation to its aim. I instantly distinguish these from the noises and movements with which it entices another animal, and from those with which it hunts, and from those with which it expresses unhappiness. I can even identify whether the unhappiness is due to fear of solitude, or the pain of a wound, or the eagerness of love. Thus, by paying a little attention I understand the language of all the animals. They express all the ideas they have, and since it seems that nature has given them only a few ideas, it also seems to me natural that they should have a limited language, adequate to their perceptions.

What differences will I encounter among the negro animals? What will I find in their heads apart from a few more ideas, and a few more combinations of ideas, expressed in a language pronounced differently? The more I examine all these beings, the more I am forced to suspect that they are different species of the same genus. This admirable faculty of retaining ideas is common to all of them; they all dream, and while they sleep, they have faint images of the ideas they have acquired while awake. Their faculties of sensation and thought increase along with their physical organs, grow weaker along with them, and perish with them; if you spill the blood of a monkey and of a negro, both of them will soon suffer from exhaustion to such a degree that they will be unable to recognize me. Soon afterward their external senses will no longer function, and finally they will die.

Finally, I see men who seem to be superior to these negroes, just as the negroes are superior to monkeys, and monkeys to oysters and other animals of that sort.

Philosophers will say to me, Do not fall into error here: Man is altogether different from the other animals, he has a spiritual, immortal soul. Take careful note of this: if thought is some combination of matter, it will have to be divisible, capable of movement, etc. But thought cannot be divided,

therefore it is not a combination of matter. It has no parts, it is simple, it is immortal, it is the work and the image of a God.

I listen to these masters, and I answer them, always mistrusting the truth of my own reasoning but never trusting theirs. If Man has a soul of the sort that you claim, I have to believe that this dog and this mole have one just like it. They all swear to me that this is not so. I ask them what difference there is then between this dog and themselves. Some of them reply that this dog is a substantial form, but others say to me, do not believe this; substantial forms are quite imaginary, but this dog is a machine like a turnspit, nothing more. I return to the inventors of substantial forms and ask them what they mean by this term, and since they answer me with nothing but nonsense, I go back to the inventors of the turnspits and I say to them, If animals are simply machines, you are certainly nothing more in comparison to them than a repeating watch is to the turnspit you speak of; if you have the honor of owning a spiritual soul, the animals have one too, for they are everything that you are, they have the same organs as those with which you have sensations, and if these organs were not used by them for the same end, God in giving them these organs would have done something useless, and you yourselves say that God does nothing in vain. Therefore, you must choose either to award a spiritual soul to a flea, a worm, a mite, or to be an automaton just as they are.

All that these gentlemen can reply to me is that they speculate that those mechanisms in animals that seem to be their organs of sensation are necessary to their lives and are simply the mechanisms that keep them alive. But this reply is no more than an unreasonable supposition. It is certainly true that in order to live one has no need of a nose or ears or eyes. There are animals who have none of these senses, but who are alive just the same. Therefore, these organs of sensation are given purely in order to sense, therefore animals sense as we do, therefore it can only be out of excessive, ridiculous vanity that men award themselves a soul of a different species than that which animates the brute beasts.

Thus, it is clear at this point that neither the philosophers nor I myself know what this soul is. All that has been proved to me is that it is something that the animal called Man and those called beasts have in common. Let us see whether this faculty, common to all animals, is material or not.

It is impossible, someone will say to me, for matter to think. I do not see this impossibility; if thought was a combination of matter, as they tell me, I would admit that thought would have to possess extension and divisibility. But if thought is an attribute of God, given to matter, I do not see why it is necessary that this attribute should possess extension and divisibility, for I

see that God has instilled other properties in matter which do not possess extension and divisibility.

Movement
Gravity, for example, which operates without any intermediate bodies, in direct proportion to the mass of a body, not its surface, and in twice the inverse proportion of the distance, is a real and demonstrated property, whose cause is just as hidden as the cause of thought.

In a word, I can only judge based on what I see and in accordance with what seems most probable.

I see that throughout nature the same effects come from the same cause, and thus I judge that the same cause operates in beasts and in men proportionately to their organs, and I believe that this principle, which is common to men and beasts, is an attribute of God given to matter; for if what we call the soul was a separate being, no matter what nature this being possessed I would have to believe that thought is its essence, for otherwise I would have no idea of this substance; and thus all those who have claimed that there is an immaterial soul have been compelled to say that this soul thinks continuously. But I appeal to the consciences of all these men, do they think? Unceasingly? Do they think while they are deeply asleep? Do beasts have ideas all the time? Does someone who has fainted have many ideas while in that state, which is really a kind of temporary death? If the soul does not think all the time, is it absurd to recognize a substance within Man whose essence is thought? What can we conclude from this except that God has structured bodies in order to think, just as to eat and to digest?

In inquiring into the history of the human race, I learn that for a long time men held the same opinion as myself on this point. I read the oldest book in the world, preserved by a people who claims to be the oldest people on earth. This book even tells me that God seems to think as I do. It teaches me that once upon a time God gave the Jews the most detailed laws that any nation has ever received. He even deigned to prescribe the way they should visit the toilet; but he said not a word about their souls. He told them only about earthly punishments and rewards. This at least proves that the author of this book did not live in a nation that believed in the spiritual, immortal soul.

I am indeed told that two thousand years later, God came down to teach men that their souls are immortal. But since I am a visitor from another sphere, I cannot help but be amazed by this inconsistency they attribute to God. It seems strange to my reasoning mind that God should have made men believe two opposite things; but if it is a question of revelation where my reason cannot see at all, I stop talking and I worship in silence. It is not for me to

examine revealed truth; I observe only that these books of revelation never say that the soul is spiritual, they say only that it is immortal, and I have no difficulty in believing this, for it seems just as possible for God to have formed it (with whatever nature it may have) in order to preserve it as to destroy it. This God, who can preserve or annihilate the movement of a body as he pleases, can surely make the faculty of thought last forever in a part of that body. If he has indeed told us that this part is immortal, we must be convinced that it is so.

But what is this soul made of? That is something the supreme being has not judged it suitable to teach men; and since I have nothing to guide me in these inquiries but the light of my own mind, the desire to know something, and the sincerity of my heart, I will seek with sincerity for what my reason can discover by itself. I will attempt to use my reasoning powers not because I believe them capable of supporting these enormous burdens, but to strengthen them through this exercise, and to teach myself how far they extend. In this way, always ready to retreat as soon as I encounter the barrier of revelation, I will continue my reflections and conjectures purely philosophically, up to the point where my reason can advance no further.

Chapter Six: Whether what we call the soul is immortal

This is not the place to examine whether God has indeed revealed that the soul is immortal; I continue to imagine that I am a philosopher from another world than this one, and judge only with the use of my reason. This reason has taught me that all the ideas acquired by men and by animals reach them through the senses, and I cannot help laughing when I am told that men will still have ideas when they no longer have senses. When a man loses his nose, this lost nose is no more a part of him than the pole star is; so if he loses all his constituent parts and is no longer a man, is it not somewhat strange to then say that he retains the result of everything that has perished? I would as soon choose to say that he drinks and eats after his death as to say that he retains his ideas after his death; the one is no more illogical than the other, and certainly a good many centuries had to pass before anyone dared advance such an astonishing idea.

I am also well aware that since God has attached the faculty of possessing ideas to a part of the brain, he can preserve this little part of the brain along with its faculty; for preserving this faculty without the physical part is just as impossible as to preserve a man’s laugh or a bird’s song after the death of the

bird and the man. God could also have given men and animals a simple, immaterial soul and could preserve it independently of their bodies; this is just as possible for him as to create a million more worlds than he has in fact created, or to give men two noses, four hands, wings, and claws. But in order to believe that he has in fact done all these possible things, it seems to me that we have to see them.

Therefore, since I do not see that human understanding and sensation are immortal, who will prove to me that they are? What – I who know nothing of the nature of this thing, shall I assert that it is eternal without knowing it? I who know that such a man was not here yesterday, shall I assert that in this man there is a part that is of its nature eternal? And while I deny immortality to whatever it is that animates this dog, this parrot or this thrush, shall I attribute it to Man for the sole reason that he desires it?

It would indeed be pleasing to survive one's own death, and to preserve for all eternity the most excellent part of oneself after the destruction of the rest, to live again for ever with one's friends, etc. This fantasy (conceiving of it purely in this sense) would be a consolation in the midst of real misery. This is perhaps why the system of metempsychosis was invented once upon a time, but is that system any more plausible than the Arabian Nights? Is it not the product of the lively, absurd imagination of the majority of Eastern philosophers? But I will suppose that in spite of all plausibility God preserves what is called the soul after a man dies and abandons the souls of beasts to the ordinary process of destruction of material things. I ask, what will Man gain by this? I ask, what does Jacques's mind have in common with Jacques after his death?

Here the reader should pay careful attention.

What constitutes the personhood of Jacques, what makes him be himself, and makes him be the same person he was yesterday in his own eyes, is that he remembers the ideas he had yesterday, and in his understanding, he connects his existence of yesterday to that of today. For if he were to lose his memory completely, his previous existence would be as foreign to him as that of some other man, and he would no more be the same Jacques as yesterday than he would be Socrates or Caesar. Now I imagine that in his final illness Jacques completely loses his memory and as a result dies without being the same Jacques who lived.

Will God give his soul back the memory he has lost? Will he recreate those ideas that no longer exist? In that case, will this not be a completely new man, as different from the previous one as an Indian is from a European? This problem is well worth considering, and I think that whoever finds a sure

way to solve the equation containing this unknown will be a very clever man.

But if it is the faculty of thought in Jacques, his soul in short, that contains his memory, then since according to our hypothesis this soul is preserved, his memory will not perish, and he will still be the same Jacques. So, we have to imagine that Jacques completely loses his memory before he dies. But could his soul not recover it, in the same way that we recover after fainting or after suffering from brain fever? For a man who has completely lost his memory during a grave illness does not cease to be the same man, once he has recovered his memory; and so the soul of Jacques (if he has one and if it is immortal by the will of God, as we have assumed in our hypothesis) will be able to recover his memory after death just as it recovers it after a fainting fit while he is alive, and therefore Jacques will still be the same man. QED.

I do not progress any further forward through this darkness, and I stop where there is no more light from my torch. For me it is sufficient that I see how far I can go; I do not claim to have any proof that the soul is not spiritual and immortal, but all the probabilities are against it, and it is equally unfair and unreasonable to demand proof in an inquiry that can produce nothing but conjectures.

The only thing we need to do is to caution those people who believe that the mortality of the soul would be contrary to the good of society and remind them that the ancient Jews whose laws they admire believed that the soul was both material and mortal, as did major schools of philosophers who were worth as much as the Jews and were very decent people.

Chapter Seven: Of Man viewed as a social being

The grand design of the author of nature seems to be to preserve each individual for a certain length of time and to perpetuate its species. Every animal is always drawn by an unconquerable instinct to everything that might favor its preservation, and at some moments it is carried away by an almost equally powerful instinct to copulate and propagate, while we can never explain how all this happens.

The wildest and most solitary animals leave their lairs when love calls them, and for several months they feel bound by unbreakable chains to females and to the offspring born from them, after which they forget this temporary family and return to the ferocity of their solitude, until the sharp sting of love compels them to leave it once more.

Other species are formed by nature to live together permanently. Some of them form truly organized societies, such as bees, ants, beavers, and some species of birds. Others are simply brought together by a blind instinct that gathers them without any obvious purpose or design, such as herds of animals on land and shoals of herring in the sea.

Man is certainly not driven by instinct to form an organized society such as the ants and bees possess. But when we observe his needs, passions, and reason, we readily see that he could not have remained for long in a completely wild state.

For the universe to be as it is today, it was necessary only that one man should have fallen in love with one woman; the care they took of each other and their natural love for their children must soon have led to ingenious inventions and given birth to the crude beginnings of the arts. Two families must have needed each other as soon as they came into being, and from these needs new amenities were invented.

Man is unlike the other animals, who have nothing but the instinct of self-preservation and that of copulation. Not only does he have the self-love necessary for his own preservation, he also has a natural benevolence toward his own species, which one never observes in the beasts.

If a bitch should happen to see a dog from the same litter torn into a thousand bloody pieces, she would take one of the pieces without feeling the least pity and go on her way; and yet this same bitch will protect her own offspring and die fighting for it rather than allow anyone to take it from her.

By contrast, when the most savage of men sees a pretty child about to be devoured by an animal, he will in spite of himself feel concern and anxiety, born out of pity, and will want to go to his help. It is true that this feeling of pity and benevolence is often smothered by the vehemence of self-love: wise nature could not have given us more love for others than for ourselves. It is already quite enough that we have this benevolence that inclines us to unite with other men. But this benevolence would only have been of negligible help in getting us to live in society; it would never have been sufficient to found great empires and flourishing cities, if we did not also have strong passions.

These passions, which it is true do such harm when they are misused, are in fact the chief cause of the good order we see today in the world. Pride especially is the chief instrument with which we have constructed this fine edifice that is society. Very soon after their shared needs had brought a few men together, the cleverest among them realized that all these men had been

born with indomitable pride as well as an unconquerable inclination to further their own well-being. It was not hard to persuade them that if they performed something for the common good of society even if it cost them a little of their own well-being, their pride would be amply rewarded.

Men thus soon came to be divided into two classes: the first is composed of those godlike men who sacrifice their self-love for the public good, the second is composed of those unhappy wretches who love only themselves. Everyone wanted and still wants to belong to the first class, although in their innermost hearts everyone belongs to the second, and the men who are most ignoble and most given up to their own desires shouted more loudly than the rest that everything should be sacrificed to the public good.

The love of command, which is one offshoot of pride, just as clearly observable in a pedantic schoolteacher or the village bailiff as in a pope or an emperor, was an even more powerful stimulus to human ingenuity. To get men to obey other men, the former had to be shown clearly that the latter were cleverer than they were and would be useful to them.

Above all, their greed had to be manipulated to buy their obedience. They could not be given much unless the givers owned a great deal; and this frenzy for acquiring worldly goods resulted in further progress in all the arts, day after day.

This apparatus would not have survived very far without the help of envy, a very natural passion that men always disguise by the use of the word “emulation.” Envy roused men out of their idleness and sharpened the wits of everyone who saw his neighbor being powerful and happy. Thus, passing from one person to the next, the passions alone brought men together and drew all the arts and pleasures from within the earth. It is with this mechanism that God, whom Plato called the divine geometer and whom I call the eternal mechanic, has given life and beauty to all of nature. The passions are the wheels that keep all this machinery going.

Thinkers at the present day who seek a foundation for the imaginary notion that Man was born without passions, and that he only has them because he disobeyed God, might just as well have said that Man was at first a beautiful statue made by God, and that life was then breathed into him by the devil.

Self-love in all its varieties is as necessary to Man as the blood that flows in his veins; and those who seek to deny him his passions on the grounds that they are dangerous resemble the doctor who sought to bleed a man white because otherwise he might have an apoplectic fit.

What should we say about someone who claimed that the winds are an

invention of the devil because they send some ships to the bottom, and who failed to realize that they are a blessing from God, by means of which trade connects all the countries on earth that are separated by the vast seas? It is thus quite clear that we owe this order and these useful inventions, with which we have enriched the universe, to our passions and needs, and it is very likely that God has given us these needs and passions purely in order that our ingenuity should turn them to our advantage; and if many men have misused them, it is not for us to complain about a blessing because some have misused it. God has deigned to put a thousand delicious foodstuffs on earth for men's use; the gluttony of those who have turned this food into deadly poison for themselves cannot be used as a stick to beat providence.

Chapter Eight: Of virtue and vice

For a society to survive, laws were necessary, just as rules are necessary for games. The majority of these laws seem to be arbitrary; they result from the interests, passions, and opinions of those who created them, and the kind of climate in which men have come together into each society. In hot countries where wine would enflame people, it was judged proper to make drinking it a crime; in other colder countries consuming it is viewed as laudable. Here a man must make do with one wife; over there he is allowed to have as many as he can feed. In yet another country, fathers and mothers beg strangers to be so kind as to sleep with their daughters; everywhere else a daughter who is handed over to a man is dishonored. In Sparta adultery was encouraged, in Athens it was punished with death. Among the Romans fathers had the power of life and death over their children; in Normandy a father cannot withhold even a farthing of his inheritance from the most disobedient son. The title of king is sacred in many nations and abominated in others.

But all these peoples who behave so diversely all agree on one point, which is that they call virtuous whatever is in accordance with the laws they have established, and criminal whatever is contrary. Thus, in Holland someone who opposes arbitrary power is a very virtuous man, and in France anyone who seeks to set up a republican government is condemned to be tortured to death. A Jew living in Metz who had two wives would be sent to the galleys, while if in Constantinople he could have four and the Muslims would admire him all the more for it.

The majority of laws contradict each other so obviously that it does not matter very much which laws a state is governed by; what is of great importance is that these laws are enforced once they have been introduced, just as it does not matter exactly which rules are introduced for games of dice

or cards, but the game cannot be played for a single moment if the arbitrary rules that have been agreed on are not followed to the letter.

Thus, in every country virtue and vice, moral good and moral evil, are whatever is useful to society, and in every place and at every period the person who sacrifices the most for the public good is the one who will be called most virtuous. It seems therefore that good deeds are nothing other than the deeds from which we derive benefit, and crimes are deeds that work against us. Virtue is the habit of doing things that please men, and vice is the habit of doing things that displease them.

Although what is called virtue in one climate may be exactly what is called vice in another, and the majority of rules defining what is good or bad are as different as are languages and styles of clothing, nonetheless it seems certain to me that there exist natural laws that men are compelled to agree to everywhere in the world, whatever others they may have. In truth God did not say to men, here are laws that I give you from my own mouth, by which I want you to govern yourselves, but he has acted in the case of Man as he has for many other animals. He has given the bees a powerful instinct by means of which they work and feed themselves together, and he has given Man certain feelings that can never be eradicated, which are the eternal well-being and fundamental laws of society, in which he foresaw that men would live.

For example, benevolence towards our own species is born in us and always operates in us, except when it is attacked by self-love, which must always have the upper hand. Thus, a man is always driven to help another man, when to do so costs him nothing. The most barbaric savage returning from a massacre, dripping with the blood of the enemies he has eaten, will be moved by the sight of his comrade's sufferings, and will give him all the help that he is capable of.

Adultery and pederasty may well be permitted in many nations, but you will never find a single one where it is permitted to go back on one's word, because a society can survive well enough when it consists of adulterers and boys who love each other, but not when it consists of people who boast that they deceive each other.

Stealing was honored in Sparta because all goods were held in common. But as soon as you distinguish between thine and mine, you will be incapable of viewing theft except as something in conflict with society and consequently unjust. It is so true that the good of society is the only measure of moral good and evil that we are compelled to change all the ideas we have formed of justice and injustice in accordance with our needs.

We are horrified by a father who sleeps with his daughter, and we brand as incestuous the brother who abuses his sister in this way; but in a newly established colony, where there is only one father with one son and two daughters, if this family takes the trouble to stop the species from dying out we will view that as a really good deed.

A brother who kills his brother is a monster, but a brother who had no other means to save his country than to kill his brother would be seen as superhuman. We all love truth, and we treat it as a virtue, because it is in our interest not to be deceived; we have viewed lying as all the more abominable because it is the easiest act to conceal, and costs the least to commit. But in how many circumstances does lying not become a heroic virtue, for example when it is a question of saving a friend? Someone who told the truth in that case would be covered with opprobrium. And we make scarcely any distinction between a man who accuses an innocent person of a crime and a brother who could have preserved the life of his brother by lying and preferred to let him perish by telling the truth. M. de Thou, who had his head chopped off because he did not betray the conspiracy of Cinq-Mars, is remembered in France with admiration. If he had not lied, he would be viewed with loathing.

But someone will say to me, will crimes and virtues, moral good and moral evil, then only exist in relation to us? Then nothing will be good in and of itself and independent of Man. I will ask those who pose this question whether there exist cold and heat, sweet and bitter tastes, good and bad smells, except in relation to us? Is it not true that someone who claimed that heat existed all by itself would be arguing nonsensically? So why would someone who claimed that moral good exists independently of us be arguing more correctly? Our good or bad physical state only exists in relation to ourselves, so why should our good or bad moral state be any different?

Are not the plans of the creator, who wanted Man to live in society, adequately fulfilled? If some law had fallen from heaven, teaching humans the will of God in the clearest terms, then moral good would be nothing more than obedience to that law. If God had said to men, I want there to be this many kingdoms on earth and not a single republic, I want the younger sons to inherit all the property of their fathers, I want anyone who eats turkey or pork to be punished with death, then these laws would certainly become the immutable rules for good and evil; but since God has not deigned, as far as I know, to involve himself like this in our behavior, it is up to us to make the best of the gifts he has given us. These gifts are reason, self-love, and benevolence toward our own species, needs, and passions; all these are the means by which we have established society.

Many people will be ready to say to me: In that case, if I find that my well-being consists in undermining your society, in killing, stealing, slandering, there is nothing to hold me back from doing so, and I will be able to give myself up to all my passions without a qualm. I have nothing to say to these people except that they will probably be hanged, just as I have the wolves killed when they try to carry off my sheep; it is precisely for such people that laws have been made, as roof tiles have been invented to keep out the hail and rain.

With respect to rulers who possess military force, who misuse it to devastate the world, and who send some men to their deaths and reduce the rest to a state of destitution, it is men's own fault if they put up with this abominable destruction, which they often honor with the name of virtue; they have no one to blame but themselves and the bad laws they have made, or the cowardice that stops them from putting good laws into practice.

All these rulers who have done so much harm to men are the first to claim that God has given us the rules of good and evil, and there is not one of these scourges of humanity who does not perform solemn religious ceremonies, and I do not see that much is gained by having rules of this sort; it is one of the misfortunes of humanity that in spite of all our desire to preserve ourselves we destroy one another in rage and madness. Almost all animals eat one another, and in the human species the males exterminate one another in war; it seems that God foresaw this calamity, by ensuring that more males than females are born to us. Indeed, those peoples who seem to have thought most carefully about the different branches of the human species, and maintained precise records of births and deaths, have discovered that on average one-twelfth more males than females are born every year.

From all of this, it will be easy to see that it is highly plausible that all these murders and violent robberies are disastrous for society, but that God has no interest in them.

God has put men and animals on earth, and it is up to them to get along as best they can. Bad luck for the flies if they fall into a spider's web, bad luck for the bull attacked by a lion, bad luck for the sheep who meet with wolves. But if the sheep were to say to the wolf, you are not morally good, and God will punish you, the wolf will answer, I do what is physically good for me, and it seems that God is not very concerned whether I eat you or not. The best thing the sheep could have done was not to wander away from the shepherd and the dog that could have protected it.

Would to heaven that a supreme being had indeed given us laws and proposed punishments and rewards, that he had said to us, This is

intrinsically a vice and this is intrinsically a virtue; but we are so far from having rules for good and evil that of all those who have dared to give laws to men in the name of God, not one has given a ten-thousandth part of the rules we need in order to lead our lives.

If anyone were to conclude from all this that that the only thing a man can do is to give himself up to all the ferocity of his unrestrained desires, and that with no innate virtues or vices he can do anything with impunity, that man should first look around to see whether he has an army of a hundred thousand soldiers loyal to him; and even so he would take a great risk in thus declaring himself the enemy of the human species. But if that man is a mere private individual, if he has any reasoning ability at all he will see that he has chosen a very bad course, and that he will inevitably be penalized either by the punishments so wisely invented by men for the enemies of society or simply by the fear of such punishment, which is a cruel enough torture all by itself. He will see that the lives of those who defy the law are normally extremely miserable; it is morally impossible that a wicked man should not be recognized as such, and as soon as he is even suspected of wickedness, he must recognize that he is the object of contempt and horror. Now God has wisely endowed us with pride, which can never bear that others hate and despise us; to be despised by those with whom we live is something that no one has ever been able to endure and never will, and this is perhaps the greatest curb that nature has placed on the unjust deeds committed by men. It is with this mutual fear that God has seen fit to bind them together. Thus, every reasonable man will conclude that it is obviously in his interest to be an honorable man. The knowledge he has of the human heart, and his conviction that there is no such thing as vice or virtue in and of itself, will never prevent him from being a good citizen and fulfilling all the duties of life. Thus, we observe that the philosophers (who are baptized with the names of unbeliever and libertine) have in all periods been the most honorable people in the world. We need not draw up a list of all the great men of ancient times; we know that La Mothe le Vayer, the tutor of Louis XIII's brother, Bayle, Locke, Spinoza, Lord Shaftesbury, Collins, etc., were men of the strictest virtue, and their virtues were not only the result of their fear of other men's contempt but arose from their actual preference for virtue. A right-minded person is an honorable man in the same way that anyone whose palate is not spoiled prefers the excellent wine of Côte de Nuits to the wine from Brie, and partridges from Le Mans to horsemeat; a wholesome education perpetuates these feelings in all men, and from this there arises the universal feeling that we call honor, which even the most corrupt cannot shake off and is the pivot on which society turns. Those who need the help of religion to be honorable are to be pitied indeed, and they would surely be monsters in their society if they did not find within themselves the feelings necessary to live in that society and if they were

compelled to borrow from elsewhere that which ought to be found in our own nature.